

REFLECTIONS
ON THE
POEMS

MADE UPON
The Siege and Taking
OF
NAMUR;

Together with a short Answer to the
Modest Examination of the Oxford Decree, &c.
Lately Published.

Both in a Letter to a Friend at Oxon.

Gaudent scribentes, & se venerantur.
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REFLECTIONS

P. O. E. M. S.

THE POET AND THE POETRY

BY A. A. R.



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REFLECTIONS

ON THE

POEMS

Made upon the Siege and Taking of

NAMUR, &c.

S I R,

Could I have any Reason to suspect (as you seem to have) the Bravery of the Confederate Army before *NAMUR*, you know my Inclinations to the present Government would restrain me from saying any thing that might prejudice its Interest ; much more from Entertaining such Groundless, Unnecessary Jealousies, as those must be, which would Asperse and Vilifie the Glory of our last Campaign. And, for many other Reasons I am a very unfit Person to answer that severe Question in your Letter, *viz. Whether the late Siege and Taking of Namur deerves the Great and Extraordinary Applause some People are pleased to bestow upon it ? And whether so many English Lives have not dearly bought the King of Spain's Town ?* But was I never so able to undertake the Dispute, which is here suggested, common
Prudence

Prudence would keep me from Entring, at this Time of Day, into the Merits of that Cause, which has long agoe been so learnedly handled by Men of great Experience and Abilities in all Professions. And therefore you cannot but excuse me, if I wave this Argument, and rather chuse to divert you with my Thoughts of the POEMS, which have come out upon this Occasion, as your Letter also enjoyns me.

And here, Sir, in Regard to your Commands, I put my self upon a Work which is by no means my Talent; nor do I desire it should be; for the Wits of our Age tell us, in their Dedications and Prefaces, That no Man can be a True Critick, unless he add to his Natural Endowments (which ought to be Great indeed) the exact Knowledge of the whole Circle of Human Literature, both Ancient and Modern. But, as I humbly conceive, the Gentlemen, who will be concerned here, are few of them thus qualified; so neither do I think it necessary their Poems should pass uncensured, till such a one can be found, especially when their Faults are very obvious to a Man of a narrower Capacity.

I would neither give you nor my self the Trouble of quoting all their several Mistakes, if I had the Poems by me; my Design, not being to attempt a formal Piece of Criticism in the Compass of a Letter, which the Post will call for before I can possibly review it. You must therefore be content with those general Impressions they made upon me, as I read them hastily in the Booksellers Shop. And the first I met with, came out under the Name of Mr. Denn: A Gentleman I never heard of before, tho he has formerly done the King some secret Service in this kind, as one would guess by his Beginning,

Once more, my Muse, thy William is thy Theme.

The Proœmium is very abrupt and uneven, and so indeed is the whole Body of the Poem. Sometimes his *Swan-like Muse* (as he calls her)

—Gently cuts the yielding Stream.

Sometimes plunges over Head in *Helicon*, and is almost drown'd. Then suddenly springing up like,

A Linnet flutters in inferior Air.

In short, tho' there is here and there a tolerable Thought, which might be improv'd to something: I must needs say (without any Prejudice to the Author) His Language is ill chosen, and his Verses bunglingly patch'd together. And *NAMUR* might still have been in the Possession of the *French*, had his Hero (my Lord *Cuts*) fought no better than he writes.

But, to atone for this, Mr. *Congreve* immediately gave us a *Pindarique Ode*, the first, in the kind, it seems, he ever made: And I heartily wish, for his Encouragement, he had been as amply rewarded as (they say) he was for his *Pastoral* on the Death of the Queen; For, truly, I think the *Pindarique* not inferior to the *Pastoral*, with Submission to Mr. *Pittis*. And, perhaps, a Judicious Reader will take as much Pleasure in the Variety and Strength of M. *Congreve's* Numbers, as in the flowing Sweetness of Mr. *Pittis's*: Who, in my Opinion, seems all-a-long to affect the same Turn of Thought and Verse, and so, by ill Management makes a good Figure become Flat and Insipid. This is a Fault not chargeable on Mr. *Congreve's Ode*; which, however, is justly Censur'd by Men of Learning, as a flashy rutilant Composure, very unworthy a Man of his Character in the World. I could indeed hardly have believ'd any Production of his would have betray'd him so much as this and his *Pastoral* have done.

And yet, I know not with what Justice Mr. *Talder's Ode* (a Man of your own University) can be prefer'd to it: When we consider the Barrenness of his Invention, and the vast Pains he takes to express but little in a great Room. His Verse is sometimes numerous and sounding enough; but then it is not animated with a True Warmth and Vigour of Fancy; so that the highest Commendation which can be given of his Poem is, That it's like a Fair Body (or Beauteous Statue) without any Soul to Agitate and inform it; whereas it is *Pindar's* peculiar Excellency, that in his most exalted Verses, he means more than he can always express, and his Thoughts are often too big for his Words, notwithstanding the Copiousness of the Language he had to deal with; which was capable of Cloathing any thing in the most pompous Garb imaginable. In short he is inimitable, but by such as have naturally a Masculine, Elevated Genius; because it is otherwise impossible to arrive at those Sublimities

and Noble Idea's, which are the Essential Ornaments of Pindarique Poesie, and to which that of *Horace* is particularly applicable,

—Cui Mens divini^{or}, atq; Os
Magna sonaturum, des Nominis hujus Honorem.

And they are much mistaken, who think (or seem to do by their Composings) that this way of Writing consists in joyning a Company of fine hard Words together, and jumping from one sort of Verse to another, as their own extravagant Fancy leads; as if there was no Texture, no Regularity to be observ'd in one of the most Noble Kinds of Poetry.

There is another Gentleman of the same College, Mr. *Addison*, who Adresses his Poem to the *Lord Keeper*; which I could willingly commend, for the sake of some Verses in it (and the more, because I fear you'll censure my Breeding as well as Judgment, in Damning all before me) if they were any thing to the Purpose. But, instead of insisting much upon that, he entertains the Reader with a long Introduction about the Largeness of the Subjects a good Poet may have in King *William's* Exploits; about *Virgil* and *Homer*; and when he comes to the Point, slyly passes it over. I wish he had perform'd what his Title-Page promis'd, because I believe him Poet enough for it, and that the World might not wait (as he prophesies it must) till

A Thousand Tears in full Succession run,

Before *Fate's unerring Doom* will send some mighty Bard to chant out the Praises of the present Age.

But tho' his Success in this Poem cannot be much admir'd, yet his Translation of the Fourth Book of *Virgil's Georgicks* may; for it is well done, and will recommend him more to his Patron and Men of Sense than a thousand such Pieces as his last. And, was not Mr. *Dryden* (who is undoubtedly the fittest Man of the Age) already engag'd in that Noble Design; this Gentleman could not better employ his Poetical Hours than in attempting all *Virgil*.

Which

Which is a Work I would by no means recommend to Mr. Manning, tho' a Gentleman not at all distrustful of his own Abilities and Skill in Poetry: Which he would shew upon all Publick Solemnities. And, you may remember, furnish'd us with an Eclogue on the Queen's Death, which an Acquaintance of yours then read to us, and justly condemn'd as a *Languid, Miserable Ditty*, in that it had nothing of Nature or Passion in it; which would doubtless have very well become his Shepherds on such an Occasion, if he'll Vouchsafe those sort of Men the common Affections of Humanity. The Character, I think, holds good in this Poem too; and tho' he will not allow it to come out of Shepherds Mouths, yet, in my Opinion, there are no such extraordinary Elevations in it, but what such Clowns, as his last were, might have said, without the Help of much Learning, which the nicer Criticks wholly exclude from Pastorals, as affected and unnatural; and therefore blame *Virgil* for having too much Philosophy and abstracted Knowledge in his *Eclogues*: A Fault this Gentleman has carefully avoided, both in his Pastoral and Heroick Songs.

You had here, Sir, been releas'd had I not this Afternoon met with one Mr. Charles Whitworth's *Albion Rediviva*.

*Whose pert aspiring Muse dares boldly ply,
With borrow'd Wings the Surface of the Sky,
And teach his Fancy without sense to fly.*

This young Poet (for such his Verse speaks him to be) is very fond of new Words, but does not always hit their Genuine Meaning and Propriety: Nor is it likely he should, the Purity and Delicacy of our English Tongue being only known to those who have long convers'd with the best Books and best Company of both Sexes; and who, after a thorough digesting of all, have not only brought themselves to make a right Judgment of Words and Style, but are perfect Masters of them too. The Run and Cadence of his Numbers plainly discovers a Boyish Affectation. As to his main Design and Platform, that is borrow'd, and is not much to be commended in those from whom he had it. For tho' the Ancients (and especially *Ovid*) being skill'd in the *Platonick Philosophy*, manag'd some of their Poems this way (I mean by representing *Things* under the Character of *Persons*) with wonder-
ful

ful Success; Yet, I must confess, I could never admire it in any of our Modern Attempters. But since the Foundation of this very Poem is not originally his, I can only pity the Gentleman's Want of Skill in making no better a Choice. And I am also sorry he may be narrowly tract in many of his best Thoughts and Turns. The chief Aim and Endeavour, if I mistake it not, is to magnifie the Glory of our Revolution; and if so, the Gentleman might very well have spar'd his Pains, after Dr. *Blackmore* had sufficiently done it to his Hands: For, certainly any Man of Judgment, that has read *Prince Arthur* (tho' that Poem has great Objections against it) will despise this trivial Paper of Verses.

Thus, in hopes you will confine these Lines to your Closet, or burn them, I have freely given my Opinion (as much as I could in Three Hours) of what Pieces I have seen; and if I have dealt too rude Blows upon the Gentlemen, who are all of them Strangers to me, and therefore ought to have been more civilly treated, you must thank your self for putting a Sword into a Madman's Hands, who is sure to Massacre all before him; and, when the Frenzy is over, will be apt enough to alledge *Juvenal's* Excuse.

—*Stulta est Clementia, cum tot ubiq;
Vatibus occurras*—

And now, Sir, if I have betray'd my Inexperience in these things, I have done it to a Friend, and that is my Security. But, if by chance, there is any Judgment in what I have said, I know not what Need there would be of Excusing the Freedom I have taken to any Body else; and the Gentlemen themselves could not be angry with me, if I told them, it was the Effect of an unprejudic'd Opinion, that none of them would ever deserve the Name of a Poet, unless he had better Pretensions than these.

But I would not here be suppos'd to rob Mr. *Congreve* of his just Commendations, since he has really perform'd many things to Admiration for a Man of his Years: And if he does not always write with the same Success, it is no other Misfortune than has attended the best Poets before him. Therefore he has no Reason to suspect that all his Works should be thought absolutely perfect, that being a Pretension beyond Human Reach. I have so much Respect for his
Worth,

Worth, that I think him not to be numbred with any of these other Gentlemen. And I heartily wish he would spend less Time in serving a Senseless debauch'd Stage, and undertake some Noble *Epick Poem*, or the Translation of *Homer* (as Mr. *Dryden* has done that of *Virgil*) for such Labours as these would honour his Country and improve its Language. Such as these, I am sure; have made the *French* far the most learned of all the Living Tongues in the World. But, I leave the Refiners of ours to take their Methods, and remain,

Sir, Yours, &c.

POSTSCRIPT.

SIR,

YOU are always very importunate with me to continue my Intelligence, as you call it; but, truly, at present I know of no News that can much affect you, unless it be *Dr. Sherlock's modest Examination of the Oxford Decree, concerning the Heresie of Three Distinct Infinite Minds in the ever-blessed Trinity*, which was publish'd Yesterday. In this Pamphlet, after a slight Touch upon you, for being no Criticks in *Latin* or *English* (a Province I thought he, of all Men would never have engag'd in) he falls foul upon your Decreeing Doctors, for being made Tools to serve the malicious Ends of his Animadverter; and says withal, That it is not legally in the Power of an *Oxford Convocation*, whatever they may challenge to themselves, publickly to declare Heresie; and this he alledges a Statute for, as well as many Reasons of his own, about the pernicious Consequence of such rash injudicious Proceedings; as if, forsooth, so many cautious, regular Men, as the Heads are, would go beyond the Extent of their Authority in such Cases, out of Humor, and not Conscience, as he unworthily supposes.

At first Sight one would almost guess by this, he gave up the Gentleman's Cause whom he undertakes to defend; but you know the Principle is too much his own to be so easily resign'd: And therefore, as a *Self-preservation-Man* would, he once more draws his Pen, that infallible Weapon, in the old Quarrel, not at all despairing of a Glorious Conquest; for he assures the World he can maintain his Hypothesis against all Opposites whatever, dogmatically asserting, If it be false, our Belief of a Trinity is

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Nonsense and Contradiction. His *Three Distinct Infinite Minds, &c.* being fairly deducible from the receiv'd establish'd Notions of the Fathers, and including, if modestly expounded, no more than they did by *Three Persons*. But under the Learn'd Doctor's Favour, whatever his Private Sentiments are, I fear his New Words admit of too great a Latitude (as the Animadverter has prov'd at Large) to be ever reconcil'd to that nice Signification the Primitive Church restrain'd *Persons* to; certainly those unwarrantable Terms, of *Three Individual Substances* never can: Which, however, are not so extravagant but that the Doctor would very fain justify them too, because he says, *The Preacher seems to have had no ill Meaning in them*; but he must excuse us if we do not allow him to be a Judge in a case, wherein he is too nearly concern'd to be an unprejudic'd one. He promises a Treatise, to give an *Account of the Judgment of the Catholick Fathers and Councils concerning a Real Substantial Trinity, and what their Notion of Tritheism is*. Which I am heartily glad of, because if freely and impartially collected, it will evidently confute his own Crude Indigested Opinion, and save your University, and every Body else the Trouble of a Formal Answer, by bringing one of his Books against another, for Self-Contradiction is no new thing to the *Master of the Temple*. He gives your Doctors an open Challenge, To enter the Lists with him, relying, I suppose, upon this Discourse he has in store; and, unawares modestly pretends, *It is indifferent to him whether he overcomes or is overcome, for Truth is better than Victory, and will make an honest Man, such as himself, triumph in being conquer'd*. But he quickly forgets this Concession, and all-along proudly insists upon the Eternal, Infallible Verity of his Principles; tho', at the same Time he cannot forbear to complain of his Animadverter's Arrogance and Evil Spirit in his Writings, such as is enough to give an Unchristian Tincture to those that read them: Whereas any unbiass'd Man must certainly return him his Character, when he has heard, that, besides a great many other Insolencies he charges Dr. South (for he is pleas'd to name his Animadverter) with Impiety and Prophaneness, and says, *He may justly fear his Blasphemies will bring down the Curse of the ever-bless'd Trinity upon him, and that will be no Jest*.

No sure: But why does our modest Christian, when he has profess'd to curse no Man, wrest the Thunder out of the Hands of the Almighty: Why does he judge his Brother, who is accountable to God only, that made him? This you will own to be a great Heighth of Unchristianity, and such an one as is not to be met with in the Animadversions; tho' I confess that Author has too much of the Spirit of Persecution in him; and the Argumen-
tative

tative Part of his Book (which is penn'd with a Strength and Clearness becoming the Subject) is extreamly injur'd by his trivial Jest and Condescensions.

It is much to be lamented that our Divines are so divided among themselves in this great Fundamental Point of our Faith; for after all their Disquisitions and pretended Definitions it will be a Mystery, and ought therefore rather to be rever'd than examin'd. Our good Friends, the *Socinians* are, doubtless well pleas'd with this Civil War in our Church, and begin to fancy the Victory on their Side. But, alas! their Reason, as arrogant as it is, can never frame any adequate Conceptions of a single Deity, no more than we can of a Trinity; and I hope this inconceivable Mystery will still be the noble Exercise of all honest Men's Faith, notwithstanding the devilish Attempts that are daily made to undermine this and all other Articles of our Christian Belief. But I have already tir'd your Patience, and ask your Pardon for meddling with things above me, and such as indeed ought to be touch'd by no Hand, much less by

London, Decemb.
24th 1695.

Your humble Servant.

F I N I S.
